

## **Bearers of bad news help the bereaved**

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It's a scene of shock and emotion experienced by tens of thousands of American families in the past half-century. Hollywood filmmakers have tried, dozens of times, to capture it.

Yet the men and women who deliver bad news from the military never know what to expect when they show up on someone's doorstep to say a loved one is dead or wounded. The family of Howell resident Army Cpl. Michael E. Curtin, who was killed Saturday in a suicide bombing attack in Iraq, was notified of his death by an assistance officer from Fort Monmouth, which handles all Army casualties in the Shore area.

"There's people who won't believe it. There's the angry response: 'How can the Navy do this to my son?' There's no response. You can see they are listening, but they are not really accepting it," said Lt. Charles Dunphy, the Navy casualty assistance coordinating officer for southern New Jersey.

"The basic philosophy is tell 100 percent of the truth. Don't embellish it or try to make it sound better," Dunphy said. Sometimes the officers don't have much detail about a death or accident, but they can usually bring some documentation, such as a facsimile document or an e-mail from a dead sailor's commander.

Whatever their main missions may be, virtually every major military installation has what's called a casualty assistance office. In an institution with 1.4 million uniformed members, many of them using powerful machines that can kill by accident as well as design, it's estimated that as many as five people die in military service every day during peacetime.

"Inherently, it's a dangerous job," said Dunphy, who works out of Lakehurst Naval Air Engineering Station in Ocean County. "I have people out on cases right now. But we have no cases due to the war."

### **24-hour window**

All service members record whom they want to be notified if anything happens to them. Those records are pulled and casualty assistance officers called, ideally within 24 hours after the military learns of a death or injury.

"Primary next of kin" are the spouses of married service members, or their parents if they are single; they get the news in person. If a married soldier is killed by hostile action, both his immediate family and parents are visited, according to Department of Defense policy.

Since the weeks before war began, the Navy casualty assistance people have been reviewing their training and making sure they have enough qualified personnel to do the work, said Dunphy, 31, a native of Voorhees.

It's a job for more experienced people, with rank of at least chief petty officer or a commissioned officer with at least three years on active duty, Dunphy said. The notification teams need to project maturity and support to families, he said. That initial contact can bring those dreaded first words, "I regret to inform you . . ." followed by news someone is dead, injured or missing in action. Officers try to make the delivery firm yet with all the empathy they can muster, Dunphy said.

There's intense emotional pressure on the notification officers, which is why "you'll never do an initial visit alone," Dunphy said. An officer usually plans to visit accompanied by a military chaplain or civilian clergy member who knows the family, "to have someone there who has seen this before," he said.

"It's very hard on the (officer). They want to have someone who can hold together. It's hard not to break down," said Dunphy, who himself has had to inform parents of their child's death.

Within 24 hours of the notification, a casualty assistance officer follows up with a call or visit to begin attending to funeral, insurance and financial arrangements.

"Pursue your duties with a keen sense of urgency, always keeping the thoughts, feelings and position of the next of kin uppermost in mind," exhorts one Army manual. "Treat them as you would want your own family treated. They are your most important duty. Give them your full attention. You are often the survivor's last link to the Army. Their enduring view of the Army is based on your success."

Navy casualty assistance officers undergo two-day training sessions that include video lessons of family members talking about the experience of having a loved one die on duty. There's testimony about both good and bad experiences, "where the Navy probably could have done a better job," Dunphy said.

Experienced officers and chaplains speak to the classes about their own experiences, he added. There's a lot of reading material to digest, including reams of paperwork that officers must handle for the families.

### **Long-term relationships**

"We take a lot of the work out of people's hands. We ask them what they want to do, and take care of it," Dunphy said. "We'll talk to the funeral home and coordinate everything."

Sensitivity is needed for mentioning the ill-titled "death benefit," a bridge payment that goes to families in the first 24 to 48 hours as a prelude to long-term survivor benefits and insurance payments. Notification officers handle the paperwork for payments and maintaining housing allowances and family medical coverage.

The relationships between casualty assistance officers and families are fairly long-term, Dunphy said: "I've seen them go as short as six months and the longest up to a year and a half."

Knowing a family may need that help is a powerful motivator to the officers, Dunphy said.

"Your primary duty is to the family," he said. "I try to think how I would want that done for my family, if they needed it."

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